

## The audience is present

Sullivan, Erin

*License:*

None: All rights reserved

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Sullivan, E 2018, The audience is present: aliveness, social media and the theatre broadcast experience. in P Aebischer, S Greenhalgh & L Osbourne (eds), Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 59-75.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Audience Is Present:**

#### **Aliveness, Social Media and the Theatre Broadcast Experience**

**Erin Sullivan**

In the spring of 2010, Marina Abramović staged an event that captivated the art world. Over the course of ten weeks, for 736 hours, she sat silently in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York while visitors took turns sitting in a chair facing her and experiencing the power of pure, embodied, focused presence. The impact of the show, 'The Artist Is Present', took many by surprise, with several participants breaking into tears during the minutes they spent with Abramović. In an age of distracted, distributed and increasingly virtual ways of being, it turned out that just looking into someone's eyes, and really being there with them, could prove a powerfully exposing and even transcendent experience.

In many ways 'The Artist Is Present' exemplifies the essence of theatre as it has often been defined: concentrated co-presence, both in time and place, which has the power to move, overwhelm and transform. And in this sense it is an odd place to start in an essay interested in broadcast theatre and its audiences, who are increasingly spread across the world. But as rooted as Abramović's marathon performance was in the physical here and now, it also enjoyed a vibrant life on screen that can help us begin to think about what it means for audiences to experience theatre in places and times distant from its inception. During the entire run of 'The Artist Is Present', a webcam live-streamed the project on the MoMA website, while photographs of its 1,545 sitters were uploaded to Flickr. These portraits then became material for the playful yet surprisingly poignant fan Tumblr, 'Marina Abramović Made Me Cry', which featured a steady stream of the pictures of sitters who

were moved to tears. Two years later, an HBO documentary about the project brought it to even wider attention, with one clip in which Abramović is visited by her former lover and collaborator, Ulay, making its way to YouTube and going viral. More than 15 million people have viewed it to date, with thousands leaving comments in the discussion thread below. Several note the emotional impact of the mediated scene, despite its now distant time and place: 'I cried', one online spectator wrote in 2016, 'but I don't understand why. Why was I so moved?' (comment after 'Marina Abramović e Ulay' 2012).

Abramović's extraordinary project, and its remarkable afterlife online, begin to suggest the power of digital technologies to engage audiences in moments of startlingly captivating performance on screen. What's more, through the capacity they give to audiences not just to watch performance but also to respond to it, they begin to make spectatorship visible in a way that has not previously been possible. Although audience members are no longer physically located in the same performance venue, many are using social media to voice their presence in new ways and create their own communities of reception. Performance scholars have typically explored the impact of technology on theatre through a consideration of what it means for an artistic event to be 'live', but in this essay I want to shift our focus slightly to the question of what it means for an audience's experience of it to be 'a-live', or animated with a sense of shared occasion, affect and absorption. Though I think that there are many ways for such 'a-liveness' to come into being, in this essay I am particularly concerned with how geographically dispersed audiences bring broadcast theatre to life by sharing their experiences of it with one another on social media. In such contexts, 'aliveness' takes the form of a collective audience practice rooted in the appreciation, celebration and discussion of an artistic event. By looking first at the idea of aliveness itself, and then by examining how it can be created through exchanges on

social media before, after and even during a theatre broadcast, I consider how the nature of audience presence is being reimagined in a digitally distributed age.

## **Aliveness**

Investigations into the meaning of liveness, and its crucial role in the production and reception of theatre, have been at the heart of debates about performance and technology for decades. At the end of the twentieth century, Philip Auslander famously contended that there is no such thing as pure, unmediated liveness, in which technology plays no part. Writing in response to Peggy Phelan's argument that 'Performance's only life is in the present', with its fundamental nature firmly fixed in the immediacy of co-presence ([1993] 2005: 147), Auslander countered that our modern conception of liveness is actually dependent on the rise of technology and that, as such, 'it is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine' (1999: 40). Highlighting how the first usages of the word 'live' arose with the development of radio in the early twentieth century, he argues that liveness and mediation always exist in a 'historical and contingent' partnership, with each helping to define and produce the other (1999: 51-3).

With the coming of the new millennium and the rapid expansion of digital technologies in everyday life, the relations between liveness and mediatization have become even more intertwined. While Erika Fischer-Lichte has followed Phelan in arguing that 'the specific mediality of performance consists of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators' ([2004] 2008: 38), others have attempted to resist 'essentialist assumptions' by navigating a middle way between the absolute necessity of physical presence and its total rejection (Balme 2008: 81). In the revised edition of his book and a follow-on article about digital culture, Auslander suggests that 'the experience of liveness' in the twenty-first

century might be as much about being part of a community as it is about sharing the same time and place. In a digitized world, he writes, 'liveness is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions but to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown' (2008: 61; 2012: 6).

Martin Barker has similarly emphasized the importance of connectedness in the creation of a new kind of liveness, though for him the term 'eventness' proves more useful in understanding what excites audiences about a digitally mediated event like a live broadcast (2013: 57). Here, the 'live' in liveness has less to do with something that is 'heard or watched at the time [and place] of its occurrence', and more with an experience that is 'characterized by the presence of life, lively; busy, active, bustling' (*OED* 2017: 10a, 4a). Liveness or eventness in such contexts is about being part of an event that is 'a-live' with experience, engagement and possibility—and while other people are certainly part of that process, they don't necessarily have to be physically co-present actors on the stage. They might be an audience that assembles at a local cinema, as in Barker's examples, or they might even be a group of like-minded people who are physically remote from one another but who produce a feeling of connectedness through enthusiastic interaction online.

Such a view of liveness directs the term away from technical requirements about time and place and towards a particular kind of phenomenological experience that foregrounds interactivity and a feeling of togetherness. In this sense, 'aliveness' possesses a deep affinity with what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'the event-ness of Being', or a state of existence produced by the contingency and 'transitiveness' of the present moment (1993: 1). In moments of 'event-ness' and 'becoming', individuals are at once situated in a very specific, never-to-be-repeated time, and infinitely open to influences that arise in the

instant. For Bakhtin, 'event-ness' is about individuality and potentiality coming together to produce a radical form of presence and present-ness (Morson 1991a, 1991b). Thinking back to Abramović, we might imagine that the experience of such labile receptivity is precisely what was being tested in each encounter between artist and visitor.

In the case of cinema broadcasts, discussions of how such eventness is created for audiences have typically focused on two factors: the real-time relay of the performance event and the collective, co-present gathering of people at different cinema venues. In such contexts, a more traditional conception of liveness as a function of time and place has been able to remain intact, even if embodied co-presence is now distributed across several points of reception rather than concentrated in a single theatre. But as broadcasting initiatives have diversified, liveness as a temporal and spatial entity, and aliveness as an experiential and affective quality, have begun to uncouple. This has been due both to practical constraints on the part of theatres and cinemas and to positive experiences of audiences at temporally asynchronous, or 'as live', showings (see Kidnie's discussion of Canadian contexts, chapter 8). Indeed, while Barker previously stressed simultaneity as a core element in audiences' enjoyment of broadcasts (2013: 40), in 2016 he revised his views, commenting that "'live-ness" no longer seems so important for audiences' (quoted in Wyver 2016). The same year, Arts Council England's 'From Live-to-Digital' report similarly concluded that temporal "'liveness" does not drive demand for Live-to-Digital, nor affect the quality of the audience experience' (Reidy *et al.* 2016: 13).<sup>1</sup> More significant for the 1,200 audience members they surveyed were the convenience and lower overall cost of attending a screening, irrespective of whether it was relayed in real-time or at a later date.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wyver's conference report (2016) summarizes the main points of Barker's as yet unpublished keynote lecture.

Such findings point to the possibility that, while experiential aliveness at broadcasts is often enhanced by the liveness of shared time and place, one factor is not necessarily dependent upon the other. While producers of programmes like NTLive might have originally conceived of their projects as predicated on the temporally live experience, audiences have discovered other ways of creating a shared sense of occasion and producing aliveness through it. The physical co-presence of fellow spectators, irrespective of the original time and location of the performance, is certainly one important factor. And yet, just as temporal synchronicity is helpful but not essential in the generation of aliveness, physical proximity to other audience members is not indispensable either. Broadcasts from smaller theatres are increasingly being distributed online, with spectators typically watching from home, and while this almost always leads to a more physically solitary viewing experience, it is not necessarily a less socially involving one. Through social media, and in particular Twitter, some broadcast audiences are finding ways to connect with one another online and create new kinds of experiential aliveness. Even at cinema broadcasts some spectators can be seen using social media to extend their presence beyond their physical location and contribute to a geographically distributed, 'un-present' community online.

In the remainder of this essay I want to explore how some spectators are using Twitter to generate a sense of aliveness that transcends physical co-presence. Using the web-based tool Netlytic, I have collected 4,633 tweets from spectators at two broadcasts in 2016: Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Rob Ashford and Branagh himself and transmitted to cinemas in July, and Shakespeare's Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Emma Rice and streamed online in September.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted at the outset that these tweets come from a small proportion of the

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Beth Driscoll, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo for teaching me how to use Netlytic, and to Elaine Goodfellow for helping me analyse these tweets.

broadcasts' spectators, so it is not my intention to generalize about audience experiences as a whole. Rather, in focusing specifically on those who freely embrace Twitter as a way of engaging with broadcast theatre, I explore one example of how aliveness as an audience practice can work.

Such an investigation contributes to the ongoing effort to understand what it means for an experience to be 'live' in a digital age. Geoffrey Wray has suggested that the incorporation of interactive elements into broadcasts may be the key to generating a sense of lively eventness among audiences (399), while Auslander has pointed to the importance of emotional engagement, speculating that 'The emerging definition of liveness' in an increasingly digital landscape 'may be built primarily around the audience's affective experience' (2008: 62). In the examples that follow, we will see how central the sharing of emotion is to Twitter communities that form around live broadcasts, and furthermore how opportunities for self-generated interaction among audiences, especially during online streamings, can deepen the engagement that spectators experience while watching along from home.

Both case studies look at audience activity that occurred as stage performances were transmitted live, meaning that my analysis focuses more on what happens when physical co-presence is unsettled than when experiences of time and simultaneity are reconfigured. It is my hope, however, that some of the ideas explored here might be relevant to future studies of 'as live' audience communities, particularly in terms of aliveness as an experiential, rather than essentialist, concept. Through a mix of traditional close reading and more 'distant', computer-aided analysis, I consider what audience tweets during these broadcasts can tell us about presence and togetherness in a digitally distributed world. While such materials may seem far from the 'event-ness of Being' that Bakhtin originally



imagined, in their celebration of shared experience they gesture towards a new kind of festivity that one hopes he might have appreciated.

### **At the cinema: Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's *Romeo and Juliet***

On Thursday night, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, the recently formed Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company (KBTC) broadcast its star-studded production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed for screen by Ben Caron, to audiences around the UK, Europe and eventually the world. Featuring the Hollywood actors Lily James and Robert Madden in the title roles (not long after they had co-starred in Branagh's feature film *Cinderella*), as well as Meera Syal as the Nurse and Derek Jacobi as an elder Mercutio, the production was largely sold out in the West End and generated excitement among theatre- and film-goers alike. As the second instalment in the KBTCLive programme, which had begun in November 2015 with *The Winter's Tale* starring Branagh and Judi Dench, this broadcast adopted a 'top end' model of production in line with that established by the National Theatre and RSC in previous years (Reidy *et al.* 2016: 117). This meant that it involved a large and experienced filming team, who rehearsed their shots and cues in advance of the broadcast; that on the night it relayed the team's work directly to international cinemas, with further 'as live' showings to follow; and consequently that it necessitated a major financial investment from the company and its partners—around £500,000 in this case (*ibid.*). In this sense, the KBTCLive producers possessed, and wagered, all the forms of prestige highlighted in the 'Live-to-Digital' report: 'a well-known brand, risk capital to invest, star casting and expertise' (Reidy *et al.* 2016: 85).

A casual scroll through Twitter on the night might have left some readers wondering what, if anything, could be gleaned from a series of very excited though rather vague remarks about the experience of watching a live-to-cinema transmission. Looking at them in

aggregate, however, can reveal some important insights into how audiences are engaging with and deriving meaning from broadcasts (a question further explored by Nicholas, chapter 4).<sup>3</sup> In the case of KBTCLive's *Romeo and Juliet*, tweeting began well before the show actually commenced, with the official Twitter accounts for the theatre company and many participating cinemas sending out enthusiastic reminders on the day. 'Tonight's the night! #RomeoAndJuliet is broadcast to cinemas around the world!' @KBTCLive posted, and many ticketholders soon followed suit: 'SO excited for @KBTCLive screening of #RomeoAndJuliet tonight', 'Almost time for #RomeoAndJuliet! Can't wait for my night in fair Verona'.<sup>4</sup> On the day of the broadcast, institutions and individuals alike generated anticipation for the evening's entertainments to come.

Tweeting of this kind intensified considerably in the half-hour before curtain up, helping produce a sense of concentrated, shared time akin to the countdown clock described by Peter Kirwan (chapter 10). During these thirty minutes, spectators used Twitter as a way of announcing their arrival at cinemas and creating a feeling of communal occasion. 'Settling in to watch #RomeoAndJuliet at the cinema. So excited! #BreakALeg', one spectator commented, and several others did the same from venues across the UK and Europe: 'ready in Worthing for #RomeoAndJuliet', 'At the Electric Cinema in Birmingham', 'Looking forward to #RomeoAndJuliet here in Belfast!', 'Best of luck from Barcelona!' As tweets continued to appear, a mental map of the geographically dispersed but experientially united broadcast audience began to take shape alongside the physical reality of each individual group assembling in person at local cinemas. Those using Twitter would have been aware of two kinds of presence materializing simultaneously: that of an

---

<sup>3</sup> Tweets for *Romeo and Juliet* were collected from 12noon to 4am GMT on the day of the broadcast using the official event hashtag, #BranaghTheatreLive, and the most popular alternative, #RomeoAndJuliet.

<sup>4</sup> Tweets from audience members have been anonymized; see Fazel (2016) for more on the ethics of citing social media.

embodied proximity at their local cinema and that of a digital connectedness spread across the country and continent. Particularly savvy social media users might also have been conscious of a third presence being created through the tweets themselves, which one-by-one helped establish a more lasting written record of a seemingly ephemeral event.

While each tweet was an announcement of presence in and of itself, frequent references to specific locations within them helped physically situate spectators' experiences and give them a material reality, even as they were relayed online. Of the tweets collected in the half-hour before show time, at least sixteen per cent contained the name of a town, city or country, and at least twenty-three per cent mentioned the name of a cinema. In such instances, members of the broadcast audience actively drew attention to the places in which they had assembled, and in doing so helped create a sense of international reception that nevertheless foregrounded the local. Alongside information about cities and cinemas, many tweeters also included explicit reference to the family and friends who had joined them for the evening. At least fourteen per cent of their pre-show messages did this in the text of the tweet—'On my way to the cinema, date night with my Mum', 'watching with school gonna be amazing', '#RomeoAndJuliet with Hayley at the Harlequin'—while others accomplished this visually by sharing group selfies from the cinema. As with the announcement of location, these tweets helped inject the experiences of the physical, co-present audience into the distributed, virtual one. Rather than drawing audience members away from the community immediately around them in the cinema, tweeting offered many spectators a way of celebrating co-present togetherness while also participating in the wider production of aliveness online.

Once the broadcast commenced, tweeting absolutely ceased, with remote audiences observing a no phones policy that is still strictly enforced in theatres, even if it has relaxed in

cinemas in recent years. During the interval, however, messages quickly reappeared, and with them lively expressions of appreciation and enjoyment. The vast majority of posts collected during these twenty minutes exuberantly commended the production and its actors: ‘a brilliant experience’, ‘fabulous’, ‘AMAZING’, ‘genius!’, ‘GORGEOUS!!’, ‘@\_richardmadden is incredible’, ‘Lily James is magical!’—and the list could go on. Indeed, one thing that immediately becomes apparent when reading through audience tweets, whether written before, during or after a performance, is just how positive they tend to be. Though some dissenting voices can usually be heard—and more on this soon—they typically amount to whispers amidst a boisterous chorus of celebration.

The extreme positivity of the *Romeo and Juliet* tweets can be further illustrated through a sentiment analysis of the messages collected. Such analyses involve the computational processing of emotional content in tweets, with key words like ‘excited’, ‘happy’, ‘frustrated’, or ‘annoyed’ being coded by an algorithm as either positive or negative feeling. Of course, this kind of automated breakdown has many pitfalls: a tweet along the lines of ‘I am so *not* excited about this event’ would still register as positive in a rudimentary sentiment analysis due to the word ‘excited’, despite the clearly opposite feeling expressed in the statement. But provided we approach the results of these analyses with caution, spot-checking distant reading methods with more traditional, close reading practices, then the information they provide can be helpful and even illuminating.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the *Romeo and Juliet* tweets, a sentiment analysis in Netlytic yields 461 instances of positive feeling versus 26 negative ones—or a ratio of nearly 18:1. Closer examination of individual

---

<sup>5</sup> [Netlytic provides a standard set of emotion-related words for which its algorithm will search, but users can edit this list to suit their particular query. Of course, emotional response is a complex issue, and seemingly negative words such as ‘disturbed’ or ‘upset’ can in fact reflect desirable affective reactions, particularly in the context of audiences watching a tragedy. This is one of many reasons why close reading and human interpretation remain important elements in computer-assisted analysis.](#)

comments in each category suggests that, if anything, the results may swing more dramatically in the direction of undiminished praise, with several false negatives quickly appearing but virtually no false positives. Whether considered together or more anecdotally, responses on Twitter to this broadcast of *Romeo and Juliet* were overwhelmingly happy.

For some, such a uniformly positive response to a theatrical event might confirm a suspicion that Twitter is not a particularly rich place for communal cultural debate—or, as Gabriel Egan has provocatively put it, that this social media platform ‘is inherently a non-reflective, off-the-cuff medium for sound-bite anti-intellectualism’ (comment after Reisz 2016). Indeed, with so many audience members uniformly ‘on message’, the kind of theatrical aliveness produced on Twitter might seem worryingly close to marketing hype. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all this positivity stemmed from mindless flattery of institutional and commercial idols, or that such behaviour is unique to social media. For one thing, most tweeters did not use KBTCLive’s institutionally branded hashtag, #BranaghTheatreLive, opting instead for the community-generated and Shakespeare-focused #RomeoAndJuliet. Such a choice suggests that their messages were intended more for one another than as lip-service to an institution. Furthermore, audience researchers working in a number of contexts, both online and off, have shown how spectators regularly report their experiences in positive terms. Such tendencies, they argue, are due to a complex mixture of social etiquette, a ‘sense of ownership’ for the success of the event, and a desire to be a part of a mutually affirming, ‘collective experience’ (Johanson and Glow 2015: 264; Bennett 2012: 551). That said, such positivity can never be taken for granted: as Kitamura Sae’s essay for this collection clearly illustrates, online reception can certainly go the other way.

Most telling of all, then, are the tweets themselves, which quickly reveal their individual texture and personality when examined in detail. Many include comments indicating that participation in the broadcast helps mark the evening as a particularly special one for the tweeter, whether in terms of celebrating a personal achievement or of embracing art's ability to inspire and uplift. 'Celebrating getting a distinction in my first year at uni', one excited spectator tweeted alongside a picture of her ticket stubs, while another reflected more sombrely, 'In the current world & domestic political mess, a trip to see the fantastic live broadcast of #RomeoAndJuliet was v welcome. #TheArts #Love'. Others commented on the powerful impact the production had on them, in some cases suggesting the kind of metamorphosis that Fischer-Lichte locates at the heart of performance: 'I never expected such a brilliant experience ... Can't wait for the 2nd act', 'Completely in tears at the end of #RomeoAndJuliet', 'Never been moved as much by a piece of Shakespeare in my life', 'Jesus, I'm shocked, amazed and speechless. Fantastic, utterly fantastic #RomeoAndJuliet'.

Of course, a 140-character tweet can rarely capture all the nuance and depth of a truly transformative encounter with art, but it would be short-sighted to reject the validity of such comments simply because they come to us through social media. By listening more carefully to these expressions of engagement, we can hear audiences telling us in their own words how a broadcast has affected them. When they do this publicly on a platform like Twitter, we can also see how very personal instances of transformation through art help generate a wider, more collective sense of presence and aliveness. Audience members may be spread across the UK and Europe, but through social media they make visible a feeling of community and shared experience. The fact that these messages live on after the event only heightens their power to generate aliveness: not only do they produce a sense of connectedness during the performance itself, but they continue to tell that story after other

traces of the event have faded from view. In this sense, they reflect Pascale Aebischer's argument about the reciprocal relationship between the temporally 'live' experience and its digital records, which allow an event to go on 'living' for spectators, researchers and students who encounter it in the future (2013: 146)—an issue also explored by Susanne Greenhalgh (chapter 1).

While the majority of tweeters at the *Romeo and Juliet* broadcast responded to the production with glowing positivity, among these celebratory missives we can also find more detailed and sometimes critical commentaries on specific performance choices. Several tweeters discussed KBTCLive's decision to broadcast the performance in black and white, creating a distinctive difference between the in-house and at-a-distance viewing experience. 'Very much enjoying @KBTCLive #RomeoAndJuliet though would prefer to have the same experience as in the theatre (rather than b& w)', one spectator wrote, while another countered, 'broadcast in 16:9 black and white looks great – good choice'. Others discussed filming techniques ('why do they keep panning off the person who's talking?'), as well as the cultural politics of casting ('really not here for the only named character played by a Black actor being Tybalt'). Indeed, the more we dig, the more we find specific reactions to particular elements of the broadcast, helping us understand the performance in finer detail and get a better sense of its varied reception. At the same time, the post-hoc nature of these tweets, which were written either during the interval or after the performance finished, means that they tend to function more as miniature, after-the-fact reviews than as in-the-moment comments that lead to further discussion. In order to find examples of more sustained, interactive dialogue, we need to look to broadcasts in which tweeting doesn't just happen before and after the performance, but also takes place throughout it:

something that can increasingly be seen during online streams that audiences watch from home.

### **At home: Shakespeare's Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Two months after the KBTCLive *Romeo and Juliet* broadcast, on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2016, Shakespeare's Globe in London embarked on its own high-profile theatre relay. Although the Globe had for many years distributed live recordings of its summer productions through its Globe on Screen programme, these films were typically screened 'as live' in UK cinemas a year after the stage run and then released internationally on DVD and by download (for more Globe broadcasts, see Aebischer, chapter 7). In contrast, the Globe's Sunday evening broadcast of Emma Rice's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed for screen by Ian Russell, involved streaming the production live online for anyone in the world with an internet connection. This colourful and unabashedly populist *Dream*, which was Rice's first production as artistic director, featured the Australian burlesque performer Meow Meow as Titania; incorporated electric sitar, Beyoncé and David Bowie into its heavily amplified soundscape; and, most controversially, projected a vivid lighting design into a space long known for a more historically unplugged aesthetic. As part of the BBC and British Council's year-long 'Shakespeare Lives' festival, which commemorated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016, the broadcast was distributed for free and remained online for six months. This meant that while it began as a temporally live event—much in the fashion of the Globe's *Richard II* starring Mark Rylance, which in 2003 had aired live on the television channel BBC4—it evolved into a more disparate, 'as live' experience as time went on (Purcell 2014: 213-14).



In many ways, the Twitter activity leading up to this *Dream* was much the same as it was with KBTCLive's *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>6</sup> Festival organizers heavily promoted the event on social media, and would-be spectators contributed to the excitement by voicing their support: 'Can't wait!', 'How happy am I?', 'So excited!!!', 'TODAY'S THE DAY!' As the broadcast began, many others eagerly name-checked the locations around the world from which they were watching, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, the Philippines, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, the USA and, of course, the UK. The fact that the broadcast occurred on the final night of this popular production's run added to the sense of occasion: having debuted nearly five months earlier in April, this largely sold-out *Dream* was enthusiastically recommended online by many who had already seen it. As with *Romeo and Juliet*, positive feeling was strong; although audience members were not physically gathered together in local cinemas, many participated in the creation of community through the lively exchange of tweets online.

What was different about this broadcast, however, was the ability of audience members to continue to tweet freely once the performance began. Live-tweeting has grown in popularity over the last decade alongside the proliferation of smartphones in daily life. Television has become a particular focus, with audience members who are physically distant from one another producing a "'group viewing" experience' by tweeting about a programme in real-time (Wohn and Na 2011). While such activity is still unusual in the theatre, the built-in hybridity of online streaming has tempted some spectators to carry it over from other media and see what the results might be. Not everyone would see this as a good thing, of course, particularly since tweeting tends to split spectators' attention between the performance and their phones. This potential for distraction is one reason why

---

<sup>6</sup> Tweets for *Dream* were likewise collected from 12noon to 4am GMT on the day of the broadcast using two hashtags: the Globe's official one, #DreamLive, and the most popular alternative, #MidsummerNightsDream.

some fans of cinema broadcasts are sceptical about streaming. 'Event Cinema is uninterrupted. Streaming you can get interrupted', one respondent in the 'From Live-to-Digital' report commented; 'It's not the same experience, not a communal experience, not an event. It cheapens it.' (Reidy *et al.* 2016: 55).

Looking at the tweets of *Dream* audiences on the night, however, we can quickly see that many spectators risked distraction in order to discuss their responses to the performance as it occurred. The very first scene—in which the mechanicals appeared as Globe ushers and talked the on-site audience through a series of humorous health-and-safety measures—inspired multiple remarks from spectators online. This was due at least in part to the provocative nature of this tongue-in-cheek prelude, which playfully sent up the historically-oriented approach to performance that had characterized work at the Globe before Rice's arrival. A new regime at the theatre was being established from the start, and online spectators responded with both delight and disdain.

@BBCShakespeare kicked things off with its own post, 'This is like no safety briefing we've seen before!', and in doing so implicitly granted permission for other would-be live-tweeters to join in. 'This preshow speech is giving me life. #NoSyphilis #NoLunging #NoDreaming #Breasts #RylancesTambourine #DreamLive', one enthusiastic viewer replied, with each hashtag referring either to one of 'Rita' Quince's self-important decrees or to the character's brandishing of a hallowed tambourine that she claimed came from Rylance himself, the Globe's first artistic director. Other spectators likewise repeated and riffed on Quince's instructions, which wove together jokes about what a show at the original, sixteenth-century Globe might have been like ('No spreading of syphilis? I'm out!'); about the revered status of Rylance and historical reconstruction at the theatre ('"Mark Rylance gave me this tambourine!"'); and finally about amateur dramatics in both *Dream* and the

present day ('The stewards are crack ups!', 'LOVE. Captures that very British am dram officiousness').

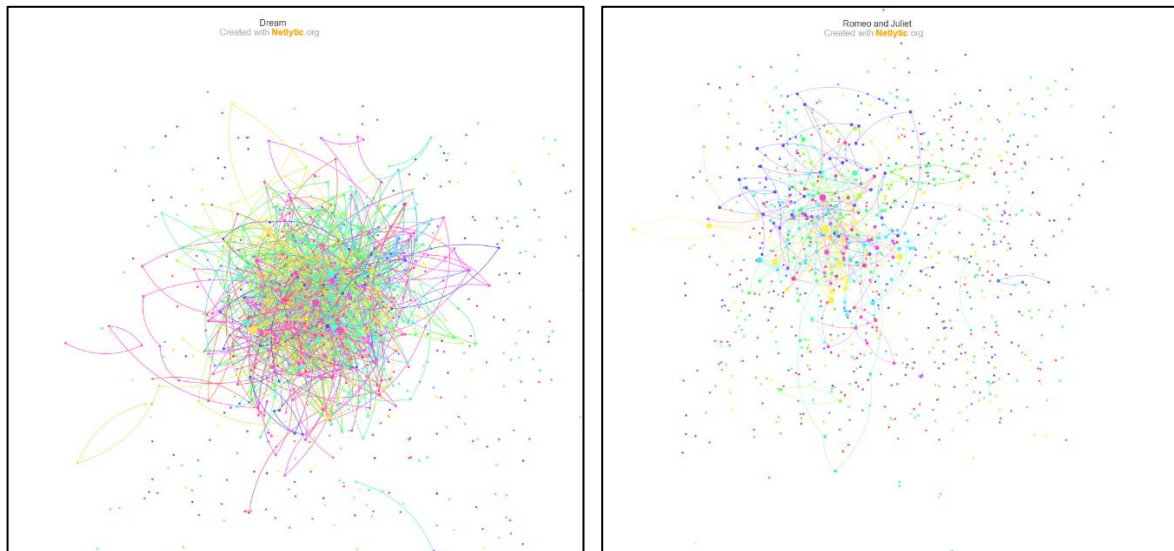
Not all the comments were positive, however, with more critical viewers objecting to Rice's irreverent take on the history of the Globe or to the overall effect of this newly scripted scene. 'Man, that intro is the opposite of funny #cringing', one spectator wrote, reflecting the scope for sharply contrasting perspectives within the online conversation. Indeed, before the production even began, some who had seen it in person countered the build-up of excitement on Twitter by questioning Rice's use of the Globe stage. 'Sam Wanamaker built @The\_Globe for the specific purpose of performing Shakespeare's plays without stage lighting', one person commented, and once the broadcast got going others likewise took issue with Rice's interpretation: 'A mess of a dream. Horrible design', 'This mishmash is not my cuppa', 'As a show it's really entertaining, as Shakespeare it's a bit of a mess. Verse speaking is poor would be so much better if sorted'. This controversial production, which in many ways set out Rice's vision for the new direction of the Globe, generated significant criticism from those who were unimpressed by the artistic approach of the incoming regime.<sup>7</sup>

Although such comments were not reflective of the overall tone of the online conversation, which like that of *Romeo and Juliet* was generally very positive, in their force and specificity they illustrated how alternative viewpoints existed and might spark additional debate online. In several cases, these live-tweeters engaged in conversation with more enthusiastic spectators, helping produce something akin to genuine discussion. Running a chain network analysis in Netlytic, which illustrates back-and-forth exchanges between tweeters, is telling: as can be seen in the visualizations in figure 1, the *Dream*

---

<sup>7</sup> See Aebischer, chapter 7, for the controversy surrounding Rice's short-lived artistic directorship.

tweets are far denser and more interconnected than those for *Romeo and Juliet*. This is because the *Dream* network of tweeters involved much more interaction among individual profiles, with audience members responding directly to one another in addition to engaging with big institutional accounts. Netlytic's 'reciprocity' score for the *Dream* tweets, which provides a measure 'of ties that show two-way communication ... in relation to the total number of existing ties', comes in at 0.01165, whereas *Romeo and Juliet*'s is 0.00749 ('Network Analysis' 2017). What such numbers tell us is that audience members live-tweeting during *Dream* were significantly more likely to engage in direct exchange with one another than those posting messages before, after and during the interval of *Romeo and Juliet*. [insert figure 1]



**Figure 1: Netlytic analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare's Globe, dir. Emma Rice, 2016) (left) and *Romeo and Juliet* (KBTC, dir. Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh) (right).**

Such interactivity also allows for a more sustained investigation into how audience members responded to certain performance choices within a production. In the case of the Globe *Dream*, its focus on issues of sexuality and gender proved especially compelling for tweeting spectators. Several commented on Rice's decision to change the female character Helena into a male 'Helenus', thereby introducing a same-sex relationship into the plot. 'Changing Helena to Helenus is a pretty brilliant move. Gives the story another layer', one spectator remarked, while others added, 'Love the gender swap', 'The first time I've ever BOUGHT the Hermia-Helena friendship', 'Loving the casting of a chap as Helena – Helenus is fabulous and feels natural'. This did not mean, however, that responses were blithely uncritical: one tweeter commented that although she liked Helenus, it was still 'a shame that one of the best female parts [got] taken from the grasp of female actors', and another asked why it is that 'Helena/Helenus's behaviour' in the woods—specifically her unyielding commitment to Demetrius—seems 'less acceptable when it comes from a woman?' For others this textual intervention reinforced a wider commitment to inclusive representation under Rice's artistic directorship: 'Oh the beautiful colours of a diverse stage! :)', one person exclaimed, while another commented, 'I adore the way the Globe actually stages diversity of race, gender, possibility, and world'. Through such posts, spectators used Twitter to begin to work through some of the thorny questions that the production raised concerning gender, sexuality and cultural representation. The ability to discuss such issues online allowed participants to engage collaboratively in the process of meaning-making around the production and, in doing so, to animate their communal experience of this theatre broadcast.

For some attendees such discussion proved a particularly enriching form of spectatorship—even more so, in fact, than that achieved by attending a production in

person. In her review of the *Dream* broadcast, Heidi McElrath reflected on the sense of community that she felt during the stream: '[W]e weren't alone. Thanks to social media, I watched the livestream in an audience of Shakespeare-lovers from around the world' (2016). The fact that this audience was able to debate the interpretive choices of such a 'bold', 'provocative' and 'unapologetic' production in real-time added to McElrath's experience of engagement and togetherness: 'I've never connected so deeply with an audience, even those I could touch and see.' Such comments suggest that, for some, interactivity may be as powerful a factor as physical presence in the creation of aliveness among audiences. It may also be the case that interaction that foregrounds conversation is particularly enhancing: as audience researchers Anja Mølle Lindelof and Louise Ejgod Hansen have shown, 'when participants share their experiences and their proposals for interpretations they become more aware of what the performance is about to them' (2015: 250).

Lindelof and Hansen's work focuses on the way *post*-show discussions can enhance an audience's 'understanding of the theatre experience', allowing it to grow 'after the performance through dialogue with others', but McElrath's reflections suggest that such enrichment can also occur *during* a production through participation in an activity like live-tweeting. While such a practice might not be for everyone, the positive experience of it among some spectators helps illustrate how there is more than one route to theatrical aliveness. Sitting in the same theatre as the performers and other audience members may remain the preferred mode for many, but gathering at [a](#) distance in cinemas, interacting online with others before and after a show, and conversing on social media as the performance takes place may prove even more powerful pathways for others.

Such an emphasis on the diversity of audience experience may be the most important lesson we can take away from this investigation into the nature of experiential aliveness. Several years ago, the sociologist Sherry Turkle argued that technology was contributing to greater social isolation and the troubling phenomenon of being ‘alone together’ (2011), but the tweets considered here suggest an alternate possibility: that social media, when embraced enthusiastically, can help create opportunities for being ‘together alone’. Not all audience members will feel the same way, of course: to return to the beginning, and Abramović’s remarkable piece of performance art, it’s worth noting that alongside the many positive engagements with this work online are thoughtfully articulate reservations such as those of Amelia Jones, who felt that the highly mediated nature of the project made it ‘anything but energizing, personal or transformative’ (2011: 18). For many, screens can prove a disruptive and disconcerting presence, and that must be acknowledged. For others, however, digital transmission and the forms of engagement it allows may indeed open up new and enlivening opportunities for experiencing art together, even at a distance.

As we have seen, for McElrath and many other audience members, social media provided a way of sharing their individual experiences of aliveness and turning them into something more collective. The fact that Branagh’s production included such high-profile actors, and that Rice’s was implicated in a wider debate about the future of the Globe, no doubt stimulated interest among viewers around the world. But this doesn’t mean that other companies can’t generate their own forms of aliveness during broadcasts, whether large or small. During its 2017 streaming of *The Winter’s Tale*, Cheek by Jowl invited audience members to use Twitter to ask questions about the ideas and techniques underpinning the production, which director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod then answered. The same year, Yorkshire Dance collaborated with researchers on the

development of 'Respond', an online platform that 'encourage[s] audiences to slow down and dwell' on artistic experience by talking about it with others (Walmsley 2017). And as we've seen with Abramović's show and the documentary based on it, discussion threads following online clips allowed geographically dispersed audiences the opportunity to share their experiences of engagement, emotion and even transformative change. In each case, we can see artists, producers and audiences exploring new ways in which aliveness as an experiential force can be sustained, and perhaps even deepened, as theatre and performance find their way in an increasingly digital world.

## References

- Aebischer, P. (2013), *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Auslander, P. (2012), 'Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective', *A Journal of Performance and Art* 32 (3): 3-11.
- Auslander, P. (1999), *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 1st edn, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Auslander, P. (2008), *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd edn, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1993), *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. V. Liapunov and ed. V. Liapunov and M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Balme, C. (2008), 'Surrogate Stages: Theatre, Performance and the Challenge of New Media', *Performance Research* 13 (2): 80-91.
- Barker, M. (2013), *Live to Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.



Bennett, L. (2012), 'Patterns of Listening through Social Media: Online Fan Engagement with the Live Music Experience', *Social Semiotics* 22 (5): 545-57.

Cotter, H. (2010), '700-Hour Silent Opera Reaches Finale at MoMA', *New York Times*, 30 May.

Available online:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Fazel, V. (2016), 'Researching YouTube Shakespeare: Literary Scholars and the Ethical Challenges of Social Media', *Borrowers and Lenders* 10 (1).

Available online:

<http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/1755/show> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Fischer-Lichte, E. ([2004] 2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. S. I. Jain, London: Routledge.

Johanson, K. and H. Glow (2015), 'A Virtuous Circle: The Positive Evaluation Phenomenon in Arts Audience Research', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12 (1): 254-70.

Jones, A. (2011), '"The Artist Is Present": Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence', *TDR: The Drama Review* 55 (1): 16-45.

Lindelof, A. M. and L. E. Hansen (2015), 'Talking about Theatre: Audience Development through Dialogue', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12 (1): 234-53.

'Marina Abramović e Ulay – MoMA 2010' (2012), uploaded by MiticoMazz, *YouTube*, 15 December.

Available online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS0Tg0ljCp4> (accessed 4 April 2017).

McElrath, H. (2016), 'Digital Groundlings', *Bloggling Shakespeare*, 18 September.

Available online:

<http://bloggingshakespeare.com/digital-groundlings> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Morson, G. S. (1991a), 'Bakhtin, Genres, and Temporality', *New Literary History* 22 (4): 1071-92.

Morson, G. S. (1991b), 'Bakhtin and the Present Moment', *The American Scholar* 60 (2): 201-22.

'Network Analysis / Visualization' (2017), *Netlytic*.

Available online:

[https://netlytic.org/home/?page\\_id=2](https://netlytic.org/home/?page_id=2) (accessed 4 April 2017).

*Oxford English Dictionary* (2017), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Available online:

<http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Phelan, P. ([1993] 2005), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge.

Purcell, S. (2014), 'The Impact of New Forms of Public Performance', *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*, ed. C. Carson and P. Kirwan, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 212-225.

Reidy, B. K., B. Schutt, D. Abramson and A. Durski (11 October 2016), 'From Live-to-Digital: Understanding the Impact of Digital Developments in Theatre on Audiences, Production and Distribution' (2016), *Arts Council England*.

Available online:

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/live-digital> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Reisz, M. (2016), 'Shakespeare Scholar Vents 500-Tweet "Bitterly Sarcastic" Attack on Book', *Times Higher Education*, 6 June.

Available online:

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/shakespeare-scholar-vents-500-tweet-bitterly-sarcastic-attack-book> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Turkle, S. (2011), *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York: Basic Books.

Walmsley, B. (2017), 'Meaningful Audience Relations', *Arts Professional*, 4 May.

Available online:

<http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/meaningful-audience-relations> (accessed 7 May).

Way, G. (2017), 'Together, Apart: Liveness, Eventness and Streaming Shakespearean Performance', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35 (3): 389-406.

Wohn, D. Y. and E. Na (2011), 'Tweeting about TV: Sharing Television Viewing Experiences via Social Media Message Streams', *First Monday* 16 (3).

Available online:

<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/3368/2779> (accessed 4 April 2017).

Wyver, J. (2016), 'Live Cinema – live!', *Illuminations* blog, 27 May.

Available online:

<http://www.illuminationsmedia.co.uk/live-cinema-live/> (accessed 4 April 2017).